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A Conversation with

CATIE NEWELL

D: Datum

N: Catie Newell

D: How are the concepts behind your installations generated? Do you usually find inspiration through atmospheric qualities such as lighting, or does it come from more textural and material qualities?

N: Ah it's a combination [laughing]. Um, usually installations, actually, it's a simultaneous kind of endeavor that's happening between some sort of sight or strange urban circumstance on top of doing some sort of kind of obsessive material research. So it's usually a push and pull between both of those, and at some point something it ends up resulting in something spatially or with the effects so it's – it's a, yeah, it's a kind of multiple things coming together. And really, I think it's a – it's a clear technique in all the work that there's a material tectonic and that there's a relationship to darkness illumination so neither of those win, its sort of – they're kind of relationship to one another.

D: You have worked closely in the past with materials such as glass, wood and acrylic, have you found any relationships between these materials?

N: Oh interesting. Some of the relationships come with maybe comes with the way of working – I – a lot of times the material choice has to do with sort of the site or the concept that's going on, and so sometimes these materials are chosen because of the project,

and sometimes they're chosen because they're translucent or transparent or opaque, and so their relationship may actually be their conversation with one another and isn't necessarily – I don't actually think it's a material attribute, because we really work with materials from what they individually and uniquely do.

Um, it may be – I have a tendency to work a lot, uh, with temperature change, and so there is like a common thread of kind of inflicted temperature change generally with heat, uh, that I think might go through – that all the materials kind of go through, but it's never a sense of sort of like “I use wood, like I use acrylic, or” I really try to listen to what's happening with the material as opposed to trying to cross them in any sort of discussion.

D: When did you start to use installations to explore your concepts and ideas? Was it something that you conceived while you were still in school, or did it develop more while in your professional career?

N: It actually started in school. I mean school I definitely was somebody who thought most through making and through models, but actually – So I did graduate school through Rice University and one of option studios that I had there, there was the visiting professors Achim Menges and Michel Hensel, and the class was about material manipulations, and in a way the kind of special logic, the tectonics and that actually completely opened up my mind to the sort of installations within architecture. So it really started there in graduate school.

installations

D: How has working in the uninhabited landscapes of Detroit influence your work and installations?

N: It's interesting because I think – when I first started doing installations in Detroit there was a lot less red tape. It was easier to do things and no one was necessarily watching or looking for a permit or anything like that, and so I think it allowed for a different type of bravery. I had moved to Detroit from – before taking the job at the University of Michigan I was working in an office in Boston, the Office dA, and I was working on projects that needed to sort of answer to the historical code and the zoning code and the landmark codes of Boston which are really stringent. I get to Detroit and there's really like no one watching or kind of holding you particular laws or rules, and in fact actually people are more appreciative that you're doing something with the space as opposed to you know wanting to know if you are doing something to like exactly a historic code or following a zoning law, or even if you had every single safety feature accounted for. So Detroit has – Detroit definitely allowed there to be this kind of, like, bravery and expediency and basically I think it provided me the chance to do all of these installations that then have now given me the confidence in – as a form of communication. So I really think its unfortunate conditions only that allowed me to just build up these ways that I see now in general. Even as Detroit is becoming more put together and there's – I don't think I could do what I've done already as easily anymore. I'm already facing that [laughing].



D: I guess I'm not extremely familiar with the current state of Detroit, are they starting to build back up again?

N: Yeah, I mean there's some – it's at that moment of transition. So you'll see new construction and you'll see energy and efforts going along. I think because we're not all that deep into bankruptcy to there's also different rules being set just to assure everyone's paying the right fees at the right time, or doing things safely and productively. So it's sort of at that moment where it's still – there's still a lot of disarray, but there's a – you can feel things shifting in terms of production with new construction or renovation and things like that.

D: You grew up in Detroit, after leaving for school and now having started your own firm back in Detroit, have your feelings towards Detroit changed? If so, what was the main influence of this change?

N: Well an interesting way I think about it is that I ended up eating my own words. There was so we lived outside of the city when I was there growing up and we didn't go in all that often, but I distinctly also remember there being particular initiatives to, like, keep people, not necessarily even going into a city, like, there's weird political things that now as an adult I understand where before I didn't understand. Where it was just sort of a, like, "No you should keep your touristy money in the suburbs instead", or like "go do this and this and this." There was intentional things built up in terms of supporting or not supporting Detroit and when I went away, I also went away so I went to schooling, then I worked in Boston. And in Boston I was working for a firm where I was doing some really, kind of, intricate work. A lot of high end restaurants and I remember people being like, "are you ever going to come back to Michigan?" I often answered "Oh I don't actually think, with the architecture I'm learning to do, there's just not a lot of people who want that in Michigan right now, like it's just not supported there. Then I ended up getting a fellowship at the University of Michigan, which brought me back, and which is where I started doing installations in Detroit and then it became very clear that that was where

I was supposed to be doing my work. So I think I can understand all the different opinions of the city throughout the years and um I've actually become somebody who has become really optimistic about the city, but also really appreciative about being somewhere where I can feel that what I do matters. So its gone from being sort of the kind of struggle that the major city of the state that I'm living in is struggling with – to sort of being like where I feel that the attention needs to be focused, or a little bit of trying to understand the realities of that city. I would also say that I've come to really – as I've grown up something that we've always appreciated is – there's life and amazing amount of culture in the city. Like, all ranges of artistic culture coming through many different forms, many different mediums, and its still so strong there that that's what makes you understand why people are still like die-hards about the trade. It's like there's this amazing gem of creativity that's there.

D: What advice do you have for current students in architecture?

N: [Laughing], that's a good one too. My advice for current students of architecture actually is to always – is to sort of, um, trying to figure out what your individual voice is and trying to figure out what you're actually – that you get really excited about your kind of way of communicating your interests. Like what kind of conversations you can have, and, like, I feel like when you're at a moment where you actually feel like you're resonating with the things that

Try to figure out what your individual voice is

you're – you truly feel, um, validated by your own creative way, is the best when you're more productive, that's when you're most excited, that's when you're, um, when I think you actually have something you can contribute to the discipline. So it's sort of, like, you know, find your own voice.

D: So for you personally, when you came to that point – when you found your voice and kind of figured out “this is what I want to do,”

N: I'm still finding my voice [laughing].

D: [Laughing] Yes, it's a never-ending process! But was it difficult to figure out, you know, “how can I actually put my voice into action?” and “where do I start?” How did you navigate those questions?

N: That's a great question, like the, um, – I think a lot of times people begin by working on instincts and begin – I think actually, um, being naive can go a long way [laughing]. Um, and be – and actually like pursuing a passion or somethi – like pursuing a vision can kind of go a long way too. Um, for me I think knowing – bring someone who was always a maker but also being away from that for a little while in terms of just like schooling or working for somebody else, when I came back around, um, basically to the position that I now have at Michigan where I found myself able to make installations and I started realizing just the sort of, um, – the way that I could use making as the form of thinking for myself too.

That's when everything sort of fell together, when I actually realized, in fact, that it's my best way of thinking. Um, which, you know, you certain – I think everyone goes through struggles in terms of, like, trying to understand how they actually can communicate through the ways that architecture sets itself up, and for me it was definitely, um... something started to feel right about the thing, and I just kept pursuing it, and you know at first you – there's also moments where you – because you feel that you're not doing something normative maybe, you don't necessarily feel like, um, you don't know how to talk about it either, so you have to develop these forms of communication, or people question it and they wonder like, “is that really architecture?”, so you might have to defend yourself, and I really think that it's, like, these constant conversations and in the end I think if you – if one feels like you – if that's the means by which to have the discussion you're wishing the architecture to have then you've sort of found those things, so yeah. It's been a – yeah, I don't know that I could nail exactly when those moments have happened, and it's all a constant learning experience, but um, I think when something feels, like, “well that's just – that's just they way I have to do it. Like, if you can remove yourself personally from the project and realize, like, oh well the way to figure out this space or to discuss this issue, or to solve that detail is this, then it's like...there it gets its own validation.